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## Presentation: Devising – exploring and expressing life-based experiences

### Abstract

The article is focused on student's life experiences and new experiences as a resource to develop identity through devising processes and aesthetic practice including the role of directors and teacher's ability to facilitate education that allows students freedom of expression.

### Keywords

*Drama; Boreale; Devising; Identity; Explore; Express; Exchange.*

## Introduction

This paper presents a key finding from my PhD research on young people's devised theatrical practice (Haagenzen 2014). It shows how devising can be described as a »life-based« theatrical practice, in that the creative devising process allows human experience to be a primary resource. Based on the creative exploration of the maker's lived experience, new experience is mediated and expressed in the devising process.

The interest in devising stems from my own experience as a deviser when I was young. I experienced the joy and satisfaction of being able to explore and express me and my fellow devisers' life-world through making theatre without a manuscript, but rather based on our own experiences and interpretations of our world. Our voices were being heard, loud and clear, in an artistic setting. The exposure from the media on how to look, how to behave is particularly strong when you are young and in the very formative years which youth certainly is. Such experiences were being cultivated and processed in the creative devising process. I realized that some devising processes helped us change and made a lasting impact on our identities, while other devising processes did not have the same impact on our lives. And I wondered: why is that so? As a result, the PhD investigates different devising processes and researches why there are experiential differences between different processes.

The result from the PhD shows that one of the answers to this question is to be found in the very start of the devising process: *different starting points in devised theatre leads to different processes for the devisers*. One starting point for a devised process can be 'borrowed' material such as found objects, text fragments, ongoing events in the world (e.g. war, political elections, celebrity news, and so on). These experiences are 'borrowed' or not directly experienced by the deviser. Another starting point for a devising process can be the usage of the devisers' personal experiences from their own lifeworld, such as autobiographical memories, experiences from being harassed, being chronically ill, falling in love, and so on. The two different starting points tends to influence the whole devising process, as this article shows. It influences the rest of the process and it might implicate how we facilitate and assess devised theatre productions. This is the focus of this paper.

## Researching devised theatre and young peoples' lived experience

In order to investigate how young people use their lived experience in their devised theatre production I did a qualitative research on young theatre students' devised theatrical production (Haagenzen 2014). I did three case studies at the Norwegian Theatre Academy in Fredrikstad and at Victoria College of the Arts (VCA) in Melbourne, Australia. I followed the production processes from they started until the opening night of the performance. The performances were played at the schools for fellow students, family and friends as audience.

I followed one collaborative work in Norway at bachelor level. This was a group devised work with five students aged 19-22 (January 2006). The second site of investigation was VCA in Melbourne, Australia. This was a postgraduate course, and the students produced solo devised works.

The study is a qualitative research, using phenomenology and case studies as main methods. I gathered the data through observation and video recordings of the performances and improvisations during the process. I did three semi-structured interviews in the beginning, middle and the end with five students. I had access to the students' process notes, which they

wrote every day during the process. I took photos and kept a researcher's journal. This is the data material that the PhD and this paper is based on. The students are given fictive names in order to anonymize them.

### The term Devising

In Norway, and in none of the Nordic countries, we do not have a native word for the term devising although it is widely used practice. We are using the English word to name the practice: devising, which means to invent something: »å finne opp« in Norwegian.

A devising process can start from anything. The deviser can choose to work and experiment with themes, images, personal experiences, or specific stimuli as music, objects, movements. Devising refers to »the practice of generating, shaping and editing new material into an original performance« (Govan, Nicholson, & Normington, 2007, p. 6). Devising describes »a mode of work in which *no* script – neither written play-text nor performance score – exists prior to the works creation« (Heddon & Milling, 2006, p.3). Devising withdraws a single definition – it refers to a variety of production methods that exists within a broad practice field: in educational practices such as process drama and theatre in education, in community theatre, performance art, political theatre, young peoples' theatre, amateur theatre and so on (Heddon & Milling, 2006). The field was developed in the historical radical period in the 1960's in the Western world as a way to make life-like theatre, based on peoples' lives and the historical changes that developed. Harvie & Lavender (2010) argues that today, devising might be considered an »orthodoxy« due to its popularity and prevailing position in theatrical practices. Although it is a widespread practice and defies a single definition, it has some common features: There is often no pre-written texts, everything can be used as a starting point, it can be either collaborative or solo creation, and it has no single method, there are many. Oddey (1994, p.1) highlights that »the process of devising is about the fragmentary experience of understanding ourselves, our culture and the world we inhabit«. In my definition of devising as a life-based theatrical practice, it is exactly this aspect of devising – as closely linked to the devisers lived experience – which is emphasized. This will be addressed later in the paper.

A deviser refers to a person who makes a performance in collaboration with others or as a solo-performance, without a pre-written manuscript. A deviser is often both the maker and the performer of the work and might be described as a creative artist with many different functions in the performance making process (e.g. performer, producer, writer, costume designer, and so on). During my PhD work, I started to name devising »Egenskapt teater« in Norwegian in order to include all these aspects, and we will return to this notion later.

### Primary and secondary experiences

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1930/2004) inspires a theoretical framework for my study of devising. His cultural–historical theory provides a theory on creative processes and meaning-making, and the relationship between culture and the individual (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010). Vygotsky emphasized creativity as an important developmental activity with an interrelated connection between the individual and society. Vygotsky (1934/1994) argued that the individual and the environment mutually constitute each other. The environment does not exist independently of the individuals who live in and

through its surroundings. The individuals are influenced by the surroundings, we interpret and act on our surroundings and thereby change it. Vygotsky (1930/2004) argues creative acts are rooted in the individual lived experience, closely related to the society in which they live. In the creative process lived experience is transformed, changed and mediated into new experiences, new meaning-making and new aesthetic expressions.

Creative activity is based on the ability to combine elements, and this capacity is called imagination or fantasy by Vygotsky (1930/2004, p. 9). He argues that imagination is often referred to as something that is not actually true and does not correspond to reality. But the opposite is the case, according to Vygotsky (ibid), in that all creative elements are derived from reality. In his little, but very inspiring and thoughtful book *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood* 1930/2004 (which is also translated to Swedish) he argues that all creativity is derived from our lived experience. He argues there are four connections between reality and fantasy. These are past experiences, secondary experiences, emotions, new experiences.

This paper focuses on the two first: past experiences and secondary experiences. The first and most fundamental association between imagination and reality is related to lived past experience. All the creations of fantasy are always made from elements of reality that are a part of a person's past experiences (Vygotsky 1930/2004, p. 13). The combinations of the elements are 'fantastic' but the elements themselves are derived from reality. Trolls, for example, exist in fairy tales only, but all the elements from which a troll is constructed are found in real life. Some elements are enlarged and some elements are reduced and then combined in new ways. The elements are derived from reality, but it is the way the elements are combined that is fantastic. Hence, past experiences are the basic elements of creation.

The second connection emphasizes the importance of secondary and borrowed experiences, also called social experience by Vygotsky (1930/2004, p. 17). Through other people's descriptions and expressions, through their experiences, we are able to envision an event we have never actually experienced ourselves. But others' experiences need support from our own fantasy in order to create meaning.

If you have never experienced the African desert, for example, you need to have experienced other concepts like thirst, sand, heat, infinite spaces and so on, and by combining your own experience of these concepts you are able to envision what a desert is and how it feels to be in a desert (Vygotsky 1930/2004, p. 16).

This ability to connect to experiences that one has not directly experienced is a fundamental human function for understanding, learning and imagining, in that it exceeds our own narrow circle of experience:

*With the help of our imagination we are able to assimilate someone else's historical or social experience. In this form, imagination is a completely essential condition for almost all human mental activity (Vygotsky 1930/2004, p. 17).*

It is obvious that this ability is essential for experiencing a central human function like empathy. Empathy enables humans to relate to, and to recognize, others' feelings and experiences.

The social, or borrowed, experience is an essential human quality that is especially relevant in theatre, where the ability to connect to someone else's experiences is crucial both for the

performer who creates a character or persona, and for the viewer who experiences a theatrical 'not real' universe.

### Devising past experience and secondary experience

In my PhD case studies, the students used both past experiences and secondary experience as impetus for their creative work. One who used past experience as a main resource was case Nancy. Nancy used her autobiographical memory as impetus to develop a stand-up solo show based on her memory from she was a ballet dancer. She danced ballet from when she was a little girl until she was fifteen. She was then severely bullied by her fellow dancers because they considered her to be too fat to be a ballet dancer and this made her stop dancing. Ever since. In this performance work she uses the devising process as an opportunity to re-discover her love for dance and overcome her bad childhood experience expressing herself as a dancer again, telling her story.

Nancy starts the process by looking at her diaries from her childhood and this makes her remember how she felt at that age. It is urgent for her to tell a true story based on her autobiographic material. She is using her past experiences as a starting point and the primary material for making the performance work. Through the devising process her story is edited, generated and re-structured into a performance and a new experience for Nancy.

Another case from the PhD, worked with a different starting point. They worked primarily with secondary and borrowed experiences: their collective perceptions of experiencing war crimes that happens in faraway places. It was a collaborative work based on appropriated material; impressions of war, using Harold Pinter's Nobel Prize speech in literature as inspirations as well as his written drama "Ashes to ashes". These two texts were appropriated into a new script and a new performance experience for the devisers. In this way they cultivated and processed their collective secondary experiences of war in their creative performance work.

The two different starting points: past experiences, using autobiographical material, and secondary experiences, turned out to be vital for the entire process for the students. The analysis made me develop a model for different modes of devising (presented subsequent) where devising processes based on primary past experiences is called life-based devising whereas processes based on secondary experiences is called self-made devising.

### Life-based or self-made aesthetic practice

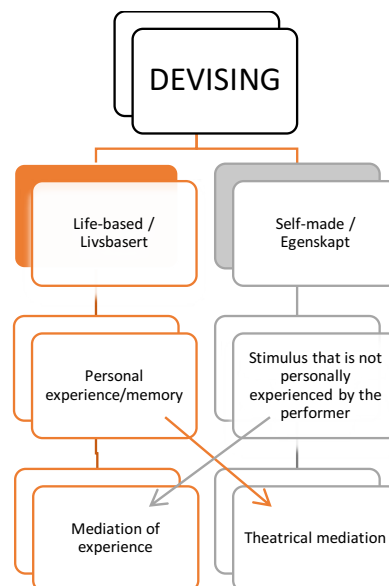
My study shows that there exist two meanings of »devising«, that might be given Norwegian names and definitions, and which may add understanding to, and help specify, the nature of the different processes.

The analysis shows that some processes are linked to primary experiences and starting points from their lifeworld (the column to the left in the model subsequent), whereas other processes starts with secondary or borrowed experience as a source for the theatrical work (the column to the right). The artistic intention in some processes is mainly connected to the deviser's subjective lifeworld and can therefore be given the Norwegian name »*livsbasert*« devising, which means »life-based« in English. Life-based devising means that the deviser's lived experience is used as main material in the devising process. This material is generated, processed and developed into new experiences during the creative work. The process of

subjective meaning-making and mediation of experiences through the devising process is an essential aspect of life-based devising.

It is also evident that some devising processes do not start with personal material. They may start with borrowed or appropriated material (including concrete material as props, scenographic elements, texts, photos) not directly experienced by the performer. In the Harold Pinter example from the PhD case study, I found that the material was interesting for the devisers but they had no experience of war themselves and therefore 'borrows' the experience. This kind of devising process can be called »*egenskap*« in Norwegian, which means »self-made« in English. This notion stresses the inventive aspect of devising.

The two different devising processes are demonstrated in the model that follows:



*Model of »life-based« and »self-made« devising*

The analysis shows that there are different levels of meaning-making in creative work (last row). In life-based devising, mediation of experience can be described as primary, whereas mediation of theatrical form is key matter in self-made devising.

Having said this, it needs to be emphasized that there is no clear cut distinction between these two types of devising, as the arrow in the model illustrates. It can easily be argued that all devising is connected to the deviser's lifeworld, and all devising processes are, in a sense, life-based. Still, this research finds that there is a difference in the way experience is used and developed, either as personal experience or as borrowed experience.

In a self-made devising process, secondary experiences can be developed into new primary experiences, and important mediations of experience can be achieved in addition to the theatrical mediation.



### Educational implications

This study of devising is situated within theatre education, and the students were inspired to »do anything they liked« in the devised production. It appeared to be different challenges for the teachers when the students decided to work with either primary or secondary material in the devising process. When students worked with life-based material, they were vulnerable to assessment from the teacher, as the students perceived the creative product and the creator of the work to be the same. Critique of the performance work was experienced as critique of their personal life-story. The students who created self-made devising had more distance to their work and were more robust when they received others' evaluation of their work. This had implications for how the teacher would assess and comment on the students' work.

The terms »life-based« and »self-made« devising might be a useful distinction in theatre education when deciding the kind of process desired in a devising production. That is to say, are we planning a process where life-based material is prime matter or will the process be based on borrowed material or task and formula-based exercises? The two different approaches can cause significant differences in how the working process is supervised and assessed. Works that are based on the deviser's lived experience are often deeply personal expressions and can pose special challenges for the teacher or facilitator. It might be more challenging to give feedback to life-based work than self-made work that is not closely connected to the deviser's personal experiences. If the teacher facilitates a life-based work, the feedback and the assessment should consider such »special challenges«. Within the educational field, directors and teachers must allow students freedom of expression while also helping them develop their own aesthetics in relation to the range of critical standards in our field.

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